

Marine Conservation Society Policy Paper on: Marine Litter Strategies

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Geographical Context: UK

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Summary

This policy paper sets out the case for strong, coordinated marine litter strategies across the UK to address the ongoing and significant impacts of marine pollution on wildlife and habitats, coastal communities and on progress toward securing a sustainable blue economy. Despite recent progress, such as new policy measures on plastic packaging, wet wipes and single-use vapes, marine litter levels remain well above recommended thresholds^[i], and the UK has not yet achieved Good Environmental Status for marine litter^[iii].

Drawing on evidence from our Beachwatch litter surveys, which recorded over 600,000 litter items collected by volunteers in 2025^[iii], this paper highlights both the scale of the problem and the critical role of long-term monitoring and citizen science in informing policy.

The policy asks in this paper include calls for all UK governments to develop and implement up-to-date, prevention-focused marine litter strategies, closely aligned with terrestrial litter policies and circular economy objectives. These strategies should prioritise stopping pollution at source, set clear and measurable targets with defined timelines, and address key pollution sources including plastics, fishing gear, sewage-related debris and shipping.

To be effective, strategies must be properly resourced, enforceable and coordinated across the UK, with strong governance through a multi-sector represented Steering Group. They should also include robust monitoring,

standardised data collection, annual reporting, ringfenced funding and support for clean-up operations. Public engagement and behaviour change campaigns are also identified as essential components.

Introduction

Marine litter remains a persistent and escalating environmental challenge, with significant ecological, social and economic consequences. As plastic pollution continues to impact marine species, coastal communities and the wider environment, the need for coordinated and ambitious policy action has never been clearer.

Over the last few years, efforts to secure a legally binding Global Plastics Treaty have continued, though negotiations in Geneva in 2025 ended without agreement as countries struggled to bridge divides on measures such as upstream production limits and lifecycle regulation. Nevertheless, nations – including the UK – have reaffirmed their commitment to stay at the table and work towards a robust global instrument capable of addressing plastic pollution across its full life cycle.

Domestically, 2025 brought some progress in the UK's efforts to address the issue, including the launch of the Extended Producer Responsibility Scheme for plastic packaging, the introduction of regulations to ban plastic in single-use wet wipes and a ban on single-use vapes. However, substantial work remains.

The evidence generated through the Marine Conservation Society's Beachwatch citizen science programme remains indispensable. This beach cleaning and litter surveying initiative has been tracking litter data since 1994 and is now one of the largest and most comprehensive datasets on beach litter across the UK. Analysed data enables the Marine Conservation Society to understand long-term beach litter trends and provides a vital evidence base to support the need for policy change.

Examples of where data has been successfully used to inform policy change includes the carrier bag charges and single-use plastic bans.

There is still a clear need to drive action towards tackling beach litter overall. We therefore continue to recommend the development of national marine litter strategies that work closely with terrestrial litter strategies. This would allow all stakeholders to follow a clear path of action, help secure further funding for specific action points within the strategies and to assign clear roles and responsibilities for delivery. To be effective, these strategies must be suitably resourced and enforced and clearly link to other programmes of policy work such as delivering a circular economy.

Evidence

In 2025, over 14,500 Marine Conservation Society volunteers submitted 1,192 beach litter surveys, covering 142km (88 miles) of coastline and removing 603,963 litter items from across the UK and Channel Islands' beaches.

A breakdown of the data for each nation is provided in the table below.

Top level stats for Beachwatch 2025 by nation

	Number of Volunteers	Number of Surveys	Metres of coastline cleaned	Number of litter items
UK	14,507	1,192	141,656	603,963
England	9,635	645	85,326	190,753
Scotland	3,763	410	39,900	385,551
Wales	858	112	13,880	20,598
Northern Ireland	95	7	700	3,301
Channel Islands	156	18	1,850	3,761

Weight of litter statistics

Typically, the number of litter items are used for policy work rather than weight, due to weight being heavily influenced by the material and sometimes the conditions of the day the survey was completed (such as heavy rain).

However, for interest, the weights of litter are included in the table below to also highlight the scale of volunteer effort.

Total weight of litter collected through Beachwatch in 2025, by nation

	Weight of total litter collected (kgs)
UK	11,452
England	4,478
Scotland	5,825
Wales	864
Northern Ireland	134
Channel Islands	150

International litter threshold comparisons

The OSPAR threshold value^{[\[iv\]](#)} for beach litter was established in 2023 as 20 items of litter per 100m of coastline. It was determined by experts that this level would reduce harm from beach litter to a sufficiently precautionary level. It is therefore clear from the table below, where the average number of items recorded per 100m is well above this threshold, that ambitious action is required from governments across the UK to reduce litter levels so that they fall below this threshold.

The analysis included in the table below is from all Beachwatch surveys submitted in 2025, alongside the analysis from 2021 to 2024. These figures may differ from the UK's contribution to the OSPAR database^{[\[v\]](#)} which only uses data from 32 beaches across the UK.

	Average number of litter items per 100m of surveyed beach 2021	Average number of litter items per 100m of surveyed beach 2022	Average number of litter items per 100m of surveyed beach 2023	Average number of litter items per 100m of surveyed beach 2024	Average number of litter items per 100m of surveyed beach 2025
UK	186	165	167	170	141
England	204	173	161	157.5	151
Scotland	161	160	190	203.7	156.5
Wales	162	134	115	120	73.5
Northern Ireland	874	570	233	316.3	380
Channel Islands	17	72	72	118.5	27

Note on Northern Ireland and Channel Islands data

Due to the limited number of surveys completed in Northern Ireland (7) and the Channel Islands (18), we are currently unable to draw robust conclusions from the litter data recorded in these nations. Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful runs the OSPAR monitoring in Northern Ireland, the latest data for which was published in November 2025 in its Marine Litter Report^[vi].

Asks

The Marine Conservation Society is calling for;

All governments of the UK publish transparent marine litter strategies that take a prevention-first approach, are evidence led, with defined targets and subject to regular updates.

Current state of Marine Litter Strategies across the UK

The UK Marine Strategy Assessment Part One published in 2025 and updated in April 2026^{[\[vii\]](#)} highlighted that the UK has not met Good Environmental Status for marine litter but does show encouraging decreases in litter levels on beaches.

The UK is also a contracting party to OSPAR and helped develop and implement the second Regional Action Plan on Marine Litter^{[\[viii\]](#)}; its midway assessment published in 2025 highlights progress but calls strongly for continued work from all parties.

There is still a clear need to drive action towards tackling beach litter overall. We therefore continue to recommend the development of national marine litter strategies that work closely with terrestrial litter strategies. This would allow all stakeholders to follow a clear path of action, help secure further funding for specific action points within the strategies and to assign clear roles and responsibilities for delivery. To be effective, these strategies must be suitably resourced and enforced and clearly link to other programmes of policy work such as circular economy. There are various strategies at different levels of use across the UK. The Marine Conservation Society is calling for all strategies to be updated and should include coordinated actions across countries.

In Scotland, a Marine Litter Strategy^[ix] was published in 2014 and was reviewed and updated in 2022; a mid-term review was undertaken in 2025 with results due to be published in 2026; and a National Litter and Flytipping Strategy^[x] was published in 2014 and reviewed and updated in 2023.

In Wales, a Marine Litter plan^[xi] was published in 2020 but does not appear to have been updated since 2023; there is currently no published national litter and flytipping prevention plan or strategy.

In England, a National Litter Strategy^[xii] was published in 2017 but has not been publicly reported against since 2022; marine litter is also included in the Environmental Improvement Plan^[xiii].

Northern Ireland's Marine Litter Strategy^[xiv] expired in December 2020, but the structure is still used to help tackle marine litter; a Plastic Pollution Plan^[xv] was also consulted on in 2025.

With only Scotland appearing to have current litter and marine litter strategies up to date, published and being reported on, it is clear that further action is required to update and ensure all litter strategies across the UK are current, published and fit for purpose.

We are calling on all governments of the UK to ensure their strategies and action plans have a prevention-first approach and are updated and publicly available with regular progress updates.

What do we want to see in marine litter strategies?

The Marine Conservation Society would like to see the following high level asks in any country-wide marine litter strategy:

- A clear vision to reduce marine litter to levels below environmental harm across UK beaches
- A target to aim towards, such as the OSPAR '20 of items litter per 100m threshold by 2030'
- To ensure focussed, targeted action and coordination is provided across different sources of marine litter such as sewage-related debris, single-use items, fishing and shipping related litter
- Clear links between circular economy, terrestrial litter and blue economy policies to ensure policy areas are cohesive and complimentary
- The set up of a cross-sector steering group to deliver and support activity of the strategy in each country with a UK wide group to ensure UK wide coordination
- Greater focus is given to stop marine litter at source as well as support for clean up

Our Marine Litter Strategy asks in further detail

Vision

Any UK Marine Litter Strategy should have a clear vision to eliminate avoidable marine litter through prevention-first, source-focused measures, alongside sustained and supported clean up and monitoring.

A marine litter strategy should embed:

- The 'polluter pays' principle
- A circular economy approach, minimising waste and leakage into the environment and maximising resource reuse
- Integration with climate mitigation and ocean regeneration outcomes, recognising the links between plastic pollution, carbon emissions, and ecosystem resilience

Targets

Any UK Marine Litter Strategy should include explicit, measurable and time-bound targets, aligned with UK and international commitments such as the OSPAR Marine Litter Regional Action Plan and Sustainable Development Goal 14.1^[xvi].

The overarching target should align with the OSPAR beach litter threshold of 20 items of litter per 100m of beach with sub targets for key litter categories such as single-use plastics and fishing gear.

Public annual reporting supported by a Steering Group should track both activity and impact to ensure transparency and accountability across sectors.

Marine Litter Sources

A comprehensive strategy must address distinct sources of marine litter, with tailored activity and policy solutions including:

- Sewage-related debris
- Fishing and aquaculture
- Single-use plastics and packaging
- Shipping and offshore industries

Policy connections

Any UK Marine Litter Strategy must align with and reinforce other policy areas including:

- Circular economy strategies
- Terrestrial Litter strategies
- Blue economy frameworks
- Climate policy

Governance: resourced and representative Marine Litter Strategy Steering Groups

A Steering Group should be set up at the same level as the strategy developed which could be at local, regional, national or UK level. These steering groups should also coordinate with each other to achieve the most impact.

Steering Groups should be established and the make-up and can be drawn from the Scottish Marine Litter Strategy Steering Group model which includes;

- Relevant Government Departments
- Regulators
- Industry

- Local authorities
- NGOs and charities
- Community representatives
- Academia

The role of the steering group would be to help develop a strategy and support government on any public consultation in the setting up of a new marine litter strategy. Once the strategy was developed and in place the role of the steering group would be to have regular meetings to report activity against the strategy and ensure coordinated effort towards impact.

It is important to note the strategy, and the steering group must be resourced with a dedicated secretariat.

Monitoring

Robust monitoring is essential to measure progress and guide interventions and future reviews of a marine litter strategy.

Progress against a marine litter strategy should be public and regularly reported on against targets, trends and policy progress.

To ensure transparency the creation of a public data dashboard or portal should be developed to highlight marine litter data against other data sets such as bathing waters, marine protected areas, restoration projects and development infrastructure.

Funding and Resourcing

Delivery must be supported by ringfenced funding, allocated to:

- Local authorities and delivery partners
- Monitoring and research initiatives
- Community-led clean-up and prevention projects
- Innovation in materials and waste systems

Funding sources could include:

- EPR revenues
- Government allocations
- Industry co-investment
- Environmental charges (current carrier bag charges and potential future charges such as a single-use cup charge)

Support for Clean-Up

While prevention is paramount, the strategy must also support co-ordinated clean-up efforts through:

- National funding for coastal and seabed clean-ups
- Support for volunteer networks, citizen science and NGOs
- Deployment of innovative technologies (e.g. remote collection systems)

Clean-up data should feed back into monitoring to inform preventative measures.

Public Engagement and Behaviour Change

A successful strategy requires public participation:

- Public Awareness campaigns, particularly targeting peak tourism periods
- Behaviour change initiatives addressing littering and consumption
- Community engagement programmes (e.g. citizen science, beach cleans) and embedding Ocean Literacy Strategies

Conclusion

Effective and impactful Marine Litter Strategies must be preventative, measurable, enforceable and collaborative, addressing stopping litter at its source while also supporting clean-up. By integrating circular economy principles, strengthening governance, and aligning with international commitments, the UK can significantly reduce marine litter and contribute to healthier, resilient ocean ecosystems.

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